

The Walloon Dialect of South Belgium

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Belgium is a country in Western Europe that is essentially stuck between two language worlds: the Germanic and the Romance. It can be regionally and linguistically divided into roughly two areas, that of the north and south. The northern region is home to a Dutch-speaking population, while the south speaks French. However, the southern part of Belgium is also home to a community of people who speak a very particular dialect of French known as Walloon.

Walloon is considered a Romance language, even though it borrows heavily from Germanic languages. It is part of the langue d'oïl family along with standard French and all of its dialects. The actual number of people who speak it is getting smaller and smaller each day, with very few who exclusively communicate using Walloon. Most people who identify as Walloon (an ethnic community originating in southern Belgium) have at least some knowledge of their language, but unfortunately it's just not used very much anymore, even among family members.



The origins of Walloon can be traced back all the way to probably before the 8th century, though it didn't emerge as a fully formed dialect of its own until the 13th century. Even then, it was referred to as "Roman" until about the 16th century. This was mostly as a way to distinguish it from other dialects of French as it had (and has) so much in common with many Germanic languages. For a time, Walloon enjoyed a more or less peaceful existence alongside other dialects.

In 1539, however, with the Ordinance of Villers-Cotterêts which made French instead of Latin the administrative and academic language of France, some began to question the existence of certain dialects of French. There was a push towards making standard French the only dialect used, which of course meant that Walloon was frowned upon. The usage of Walloon decreased even more after France seized Wallonia (the region of southern Belgium where Walloon is mostly spoken) in 1795. Because of that, standard French became seen as the most socially acceptable of the French dialects.

Yet another blow to Walloon happened after World War I when public schools in southern Belgium introduced French-speaking education for everyone. This may not sound so terrible, but it actually caused even more people to look down on Walloon as improper and even something worthy of disdain. In 1952, the Belgian government went so far as to start punishing students who spoke Walloon in class. Knowing all this, it makes sense that today Walloon is a dialect that practically no one is certified to teach as a language.

Today, speakers of Walloon can be found in the Wallonia region of southern Belgium as well as in Brussels after some native Walloons immigrated to the city. There's also a small part of northern France, such as the *botte de Givet* and some villages in Nord, that have Walloon speaking communities. In the U.S., there is a small community of Walloon speakers in Door County, Wisconsin. This is thanks to a large group of native Walloons who immigrated to the area in the 19th century.

Within Belgium, you can find four distinct dialects of Walloon depending on which part of Wallonia (in southern Belgium) you go to. Central Walloon is found in central Wallonia, namely the capital Namur and the cities Dinant and Wavre. Eastern Walloon is the most “Walloon” of the dialects, if that makes sense. It’s the dialect that best embodies what Walloon was like back in its heyday. Speakers of Eastern Walloon are found in Huy, Verviers, Malmedy, Waremme, and Liège. The dialect closest to standard French is Western Walloon, which can be heard in Nivelles, Philippeville, and Charleroi. Finally, Southern Walloon is found in Neufchâteau, Bastogne, and Marche-en-Famenne. It shares many characteristics with the Lorrain dialect of French.

So, how does Walloon differ from standard French, you might ask? First of all, it preserves a lot of its Latin roots, more so than many other Romance languages. This makes it sound a bit odd and almost archaic, but the fact is, it is odd and archaic. Walloon also leans heavily on many of the Germanic languages, which is evident in everything from its grammar to phonology. Something else that sets it apart is the fact that there is no standard orthography, mostly due to phonological differences in the four Walloon dialects. There is a push to establish a standard for spelling, known as the Rifondou walon.

Some notable traits of Walloon are taken directly from Latin, while others are also found in several Germanic languages. Walloon phonology has stayed basically the same since the High Middle Ages. From Latin, Walloon took the phonemes “dj” and “tch”, which make the “ch” sound in “cherry” and the “j” in “joke,” respectively. Many verbs and other words also have Latin roots. Vowel length is important, as it is used to distinguish otherwise indistinguishable words. Nasal vowels and consonants are not separated as much as in other dialects of French.

Other things you will notice in Walloon include the fact that there isn’t a difference between possessives and definite articles in terms of gender. This really sets it apart from standard French, as well as the fact that adjectives are placed before nouns. That last characteristic is probably due to the influence of Germanic languages upon Walloon, which tend to put the adjective before the noun. There are also some specific sentence construction taken almost directly from Germanic languages.

In terms of the written word, Walloon had its peak back in the 19th century, when many Flemish people immigrated to Wallonia. Most of the literature created in this period was either of the play or poem variety, with some periodicals as well. Some of these were adaptations of other works, but many were original works written in order to promote the Walloon identity and language in a time when other languages were encroaching on territory that used to purely Walloon.

Though there is Walloon literature that dates as far back as the 16th century, after its revival and “rebirth” period in the 19th century, it began to fall away into obscurity along with the rest of the language. Nowadays, there has been a revival of Walloon literature that mostly includes theater and magazines. The magazines of today tend to focus on literature, which is encouraging Walloon writers to continue their craft, as they most definitely have an audience still.

Theater has become extremely important to the preservation of Walloon as both a language and identity. It makes sense though, as the theater was one of the only forms of entertainment for the better half of the 19th century in Wallonia. The revival of Walloon literature in general would absolutely have to include theater, and there are currently over 200 theater companies, all non-professional, in Wallonia. Since Walloon is mostly spoken rather than written among the general population, theater is the perfect way to keep the language alive.

In recent years, there have been many efforts to try to revive Walloon and get more people to speak it on a daily basis, even if only with their families. Thankfully, some radio and television stations have obliged and offer

a few hours a week of programming exclusively in Walloon. Some new rock bands are even writing and performing songs in the dialect, which is great since the last time there was any popular music in Walloon was in the 1970s.

The organization behind this push for more Walloon presence is the UCW, or Union Culturelle Wallonne. Besides having strong links with Walloon theater, the UCW is pushing for Walloon education. This is particularly difficult, however, as there are very few teachers who are actually trained to teach Walloon, and even less educational material to use in the classroom. The UCW recognizes this, and so has also been advocating for those who still speak Walloon to try to do it more in their homes and with fellow speakers. It may not create huge waves in terms of growth of the language, but at this point it's more about preservation anyway.

The future of Walloon is obviously in the hands (or mouths) of the youth, but that future does look reasonably bright. For starters, there are still a good number of people who speak Walloon, and even more who understand it. Public opinion is turning around as well, after years of looking down on Walloon as that silly dialect of French that nobody could understand. Though young people may not be speaking it around the clock, they are aware of its importance as part of their Walloon identity and are finding ways to fit it into their own French.

This "Walloonization" of standard French is creating a new sort of hybrid dialect, but it means that people still find Walloon important enough to try to incorporate it into their everyday lives. If more people continue to do this, and continue to support Walloon theater and publications, a language that has come close to disappearing many times throughout history may live on long enough to be passed on to future generations, who will then use it as best they can in order to keep their own cultural identities alive.

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